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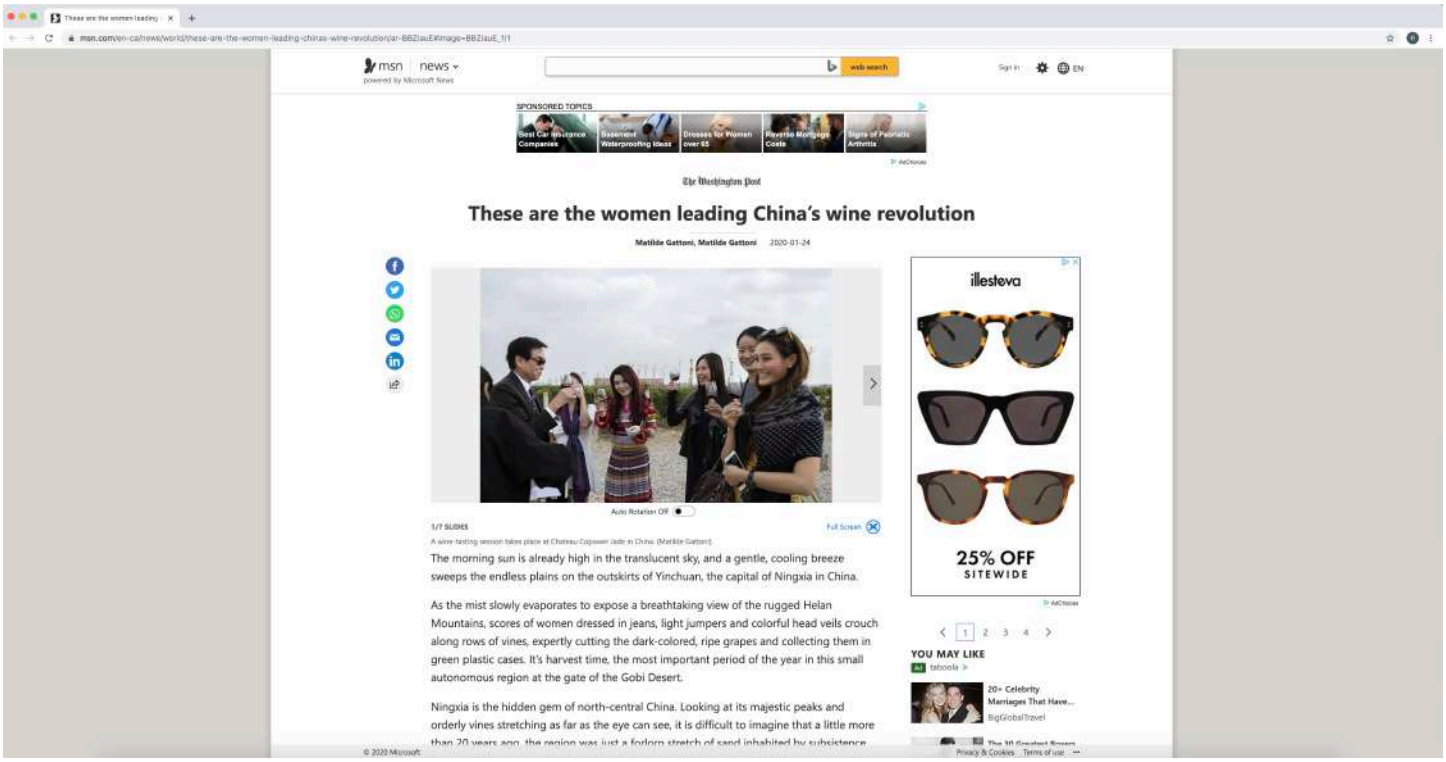

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These are the women leading China's wine revolution

Matilde Gattoni, Matilde Gattoni 2020-01-24

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A wine-tasting session takes place at Chateau Copower Jade in China. (Matilde Gattoni)

The morning sun is already high in the translucent sky, and a gentle, cooling breeze sweeps the endless plains on the outskirts of Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia in China.

As the mist slowly evaporates to expose a breathtaking view of the rugged Helan Mountains, scores of women dressed in jeans, light jumpers and colorful head veils crouch along rows of vines, expertly cutting the dark-colored, ripe grapes and collecting them in green plastic cases. It's harvest time, the most important period of the year in this small autonomous region at the gate of the Gobi Desert.

Ningxia is the hidden gem of north-central China. Looking at its majestic peaks and orderly vines stretching as far as the eye can see, it is difficult to imagine that a little more than 20 years ago, the region was just a forlorn stretch of sand inhabited by subsistence

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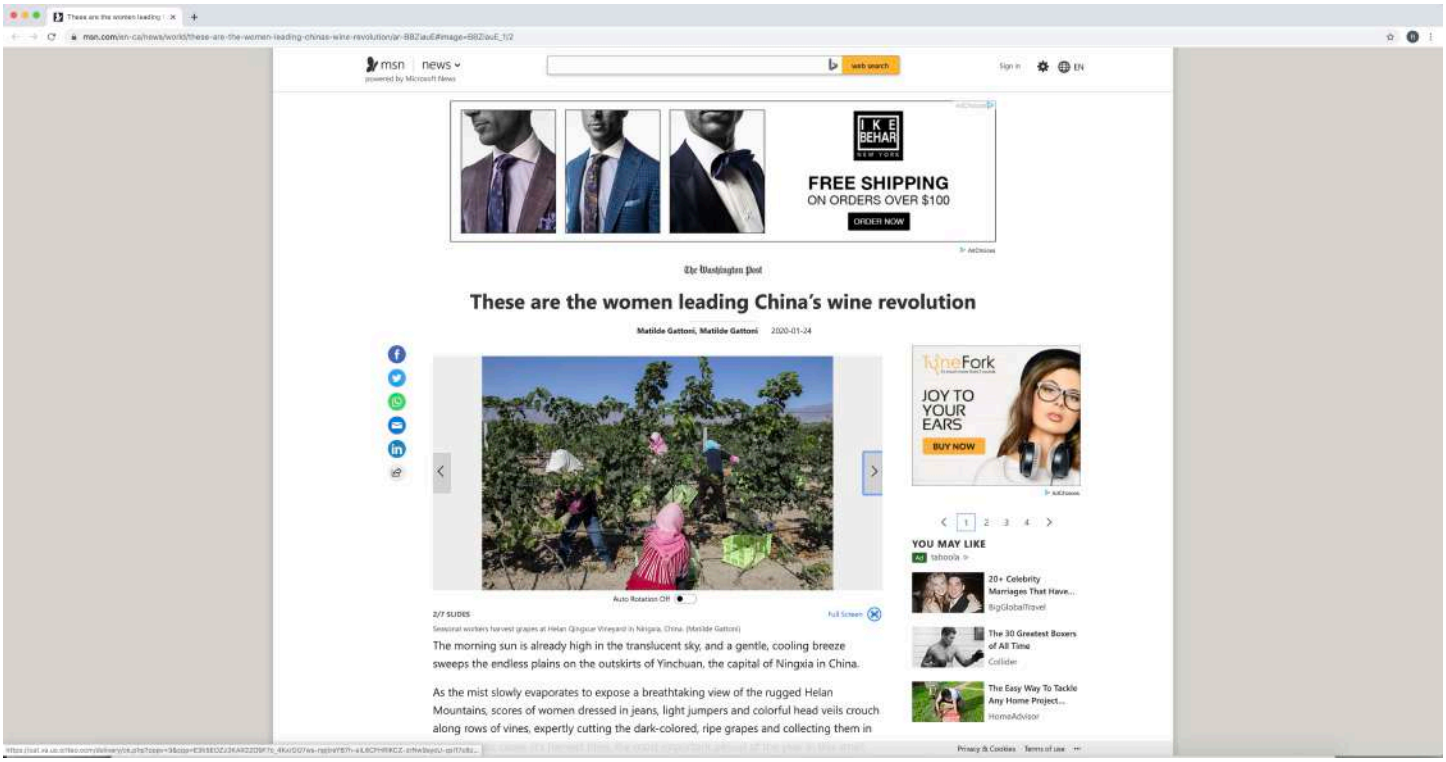
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Seasonal workers harvest grapes at Helan Qingyuan Vineyard in Ningxia, China. (Matilde Gattoni)
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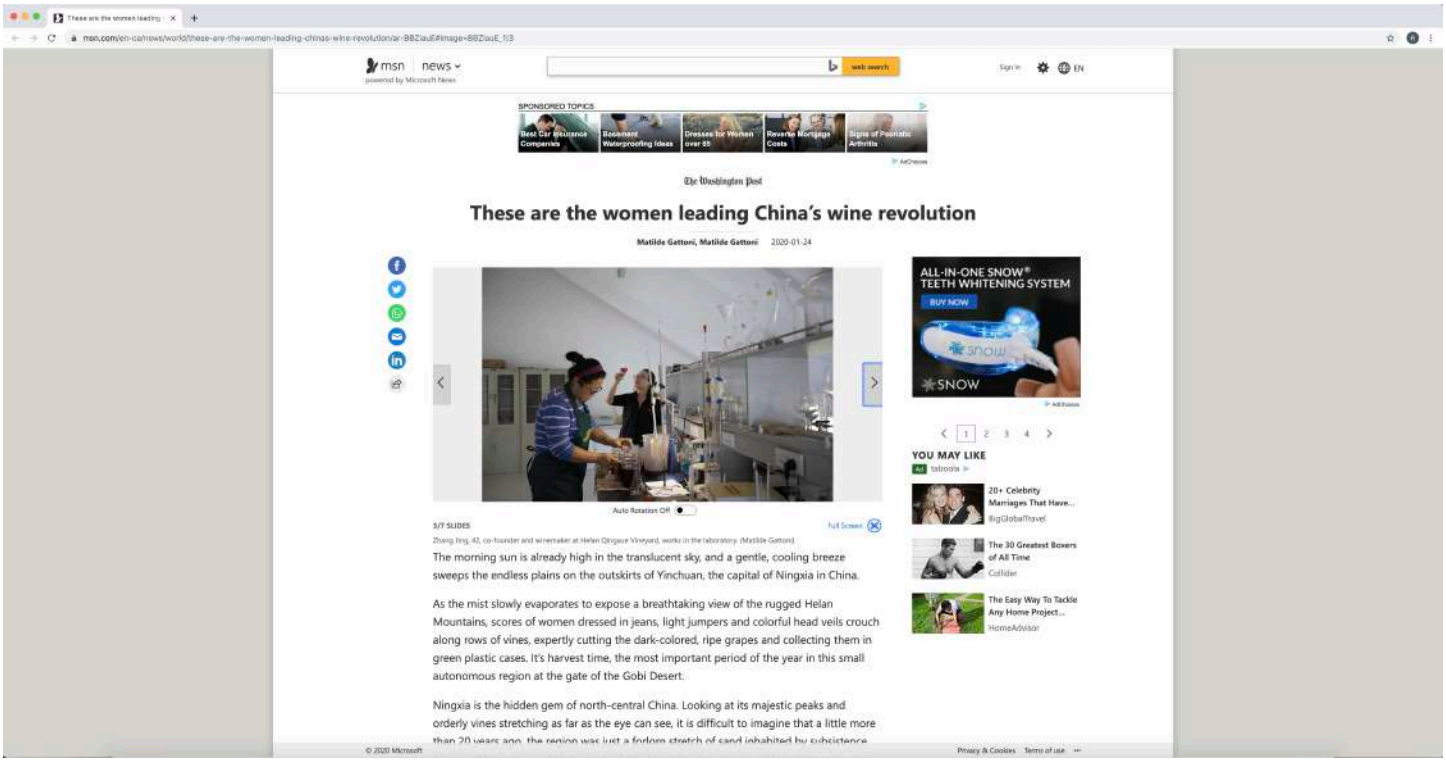
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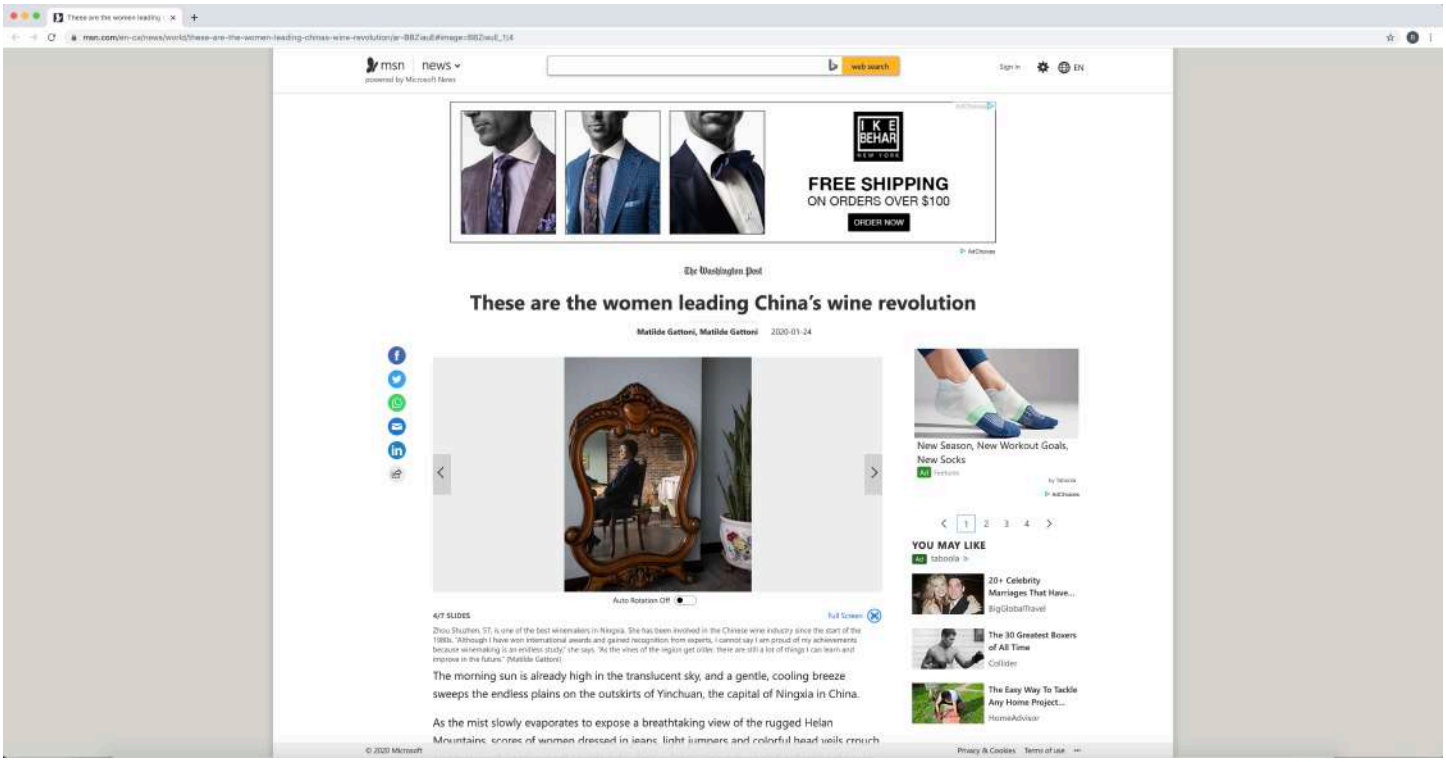
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Zhou Shuzhen, 57, is one of the best winemakers in Ningxia. She has been involved in the Chinese wine industry since the start of the 1980s. "Although I have won international awards and gained recognition from experts, I cannot say I am proud of my achievements because winemaking is an endless study," she says. "As the vines of the region get older, there are still a lot of things I can learn and improve in the future." (Matilde Gattoni)
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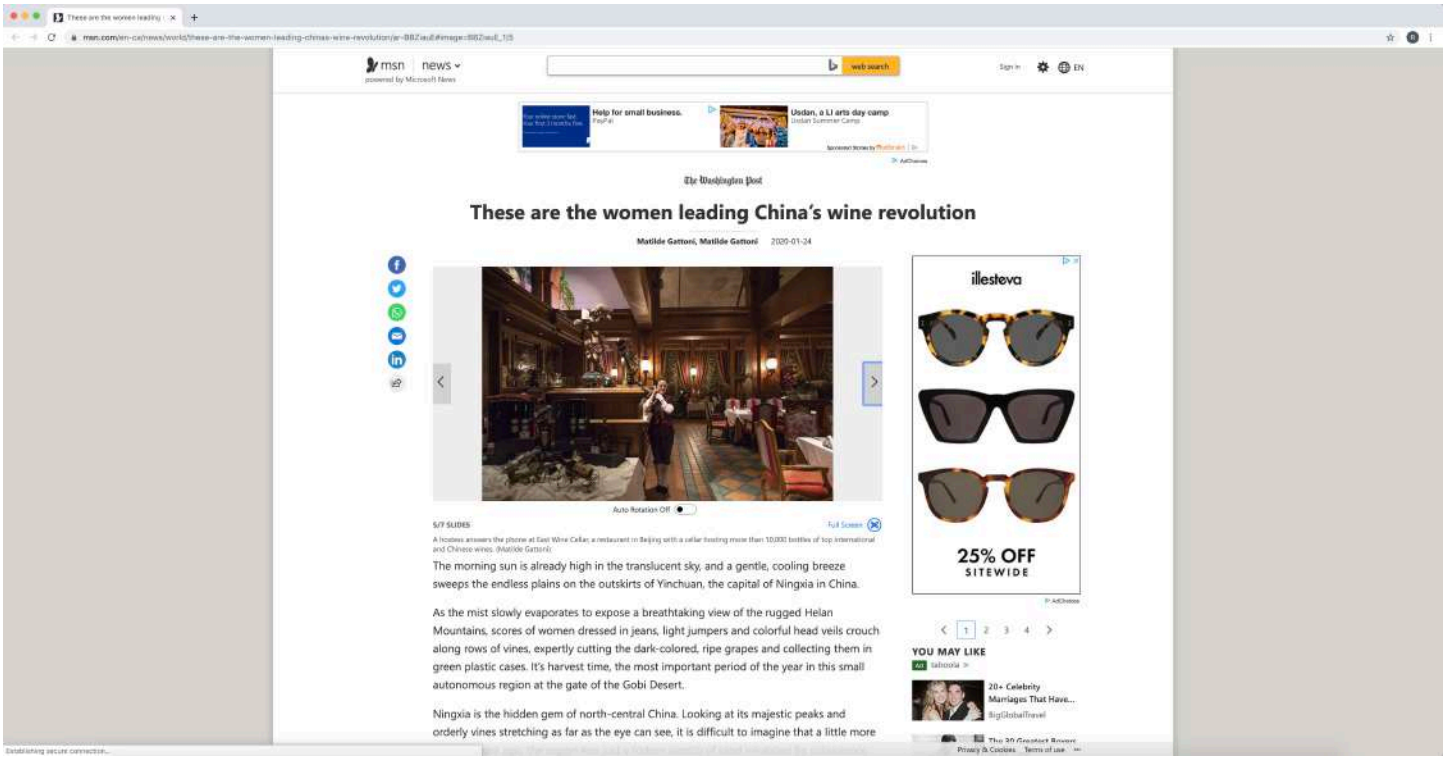
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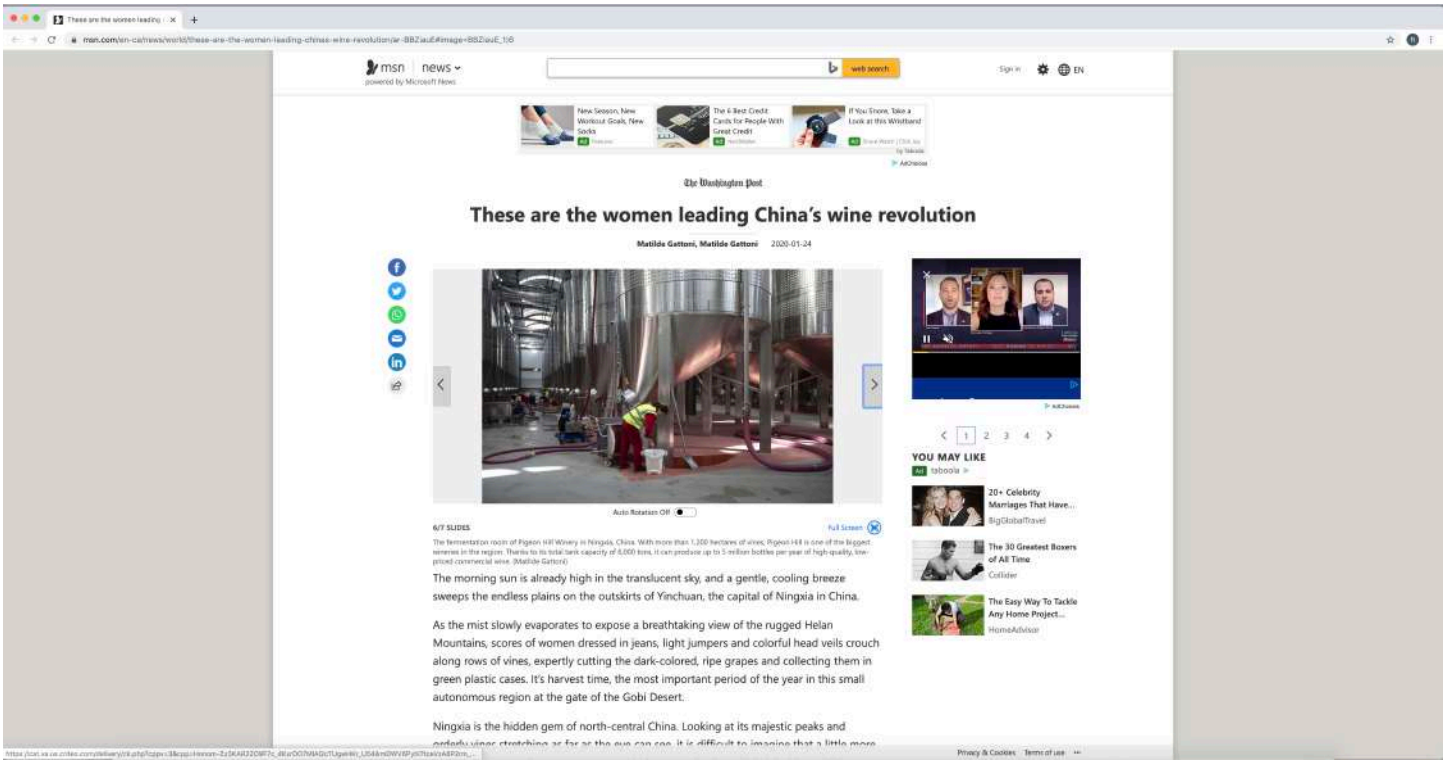
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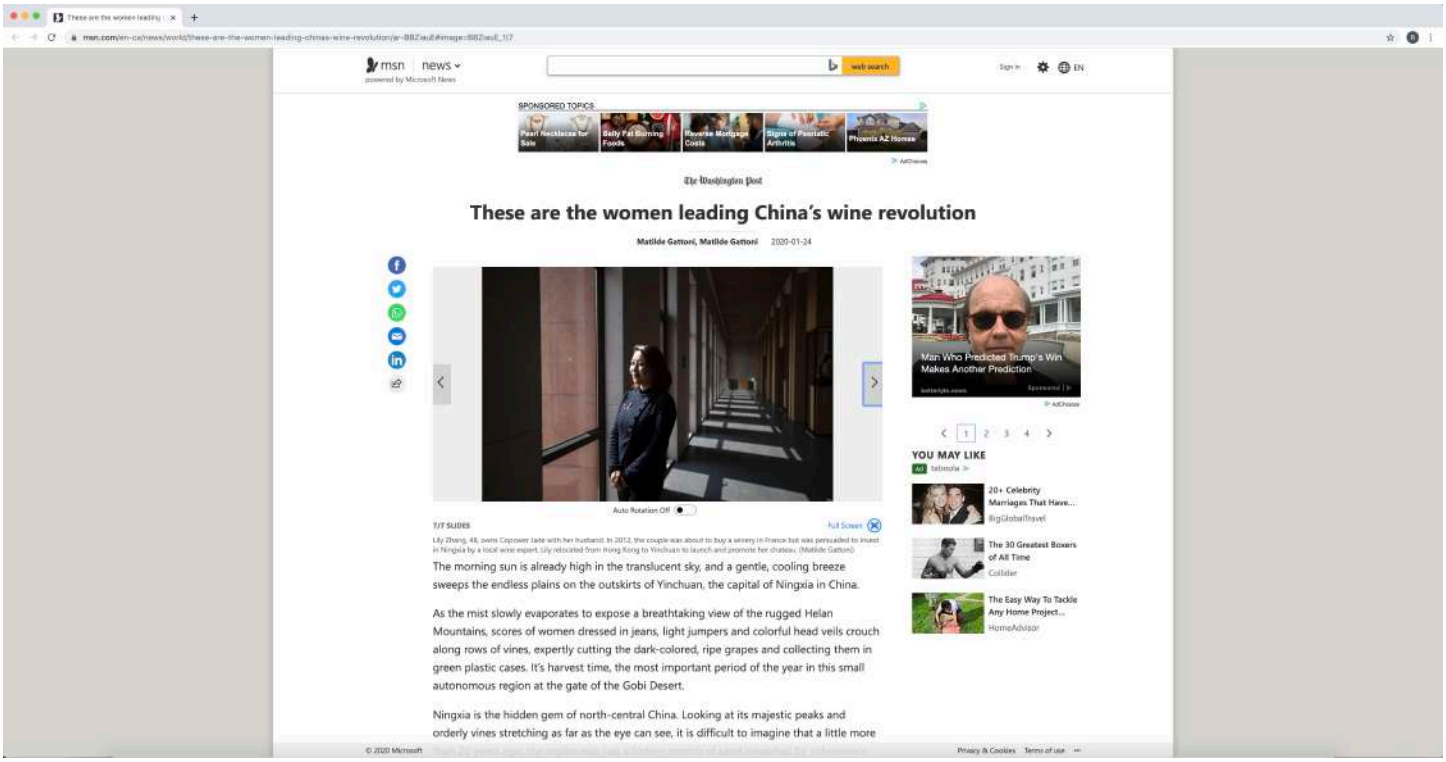

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Lily Zheng, 48, owns Copower Jade with her husband. In 2012, the couple was about to buy a winery in France but was persuaded to invest in Ningxia by a local wine expert. Lily relocated from Hong Kong to Yinchuan to launch and promote her chateau. (Matilde Gattoni)

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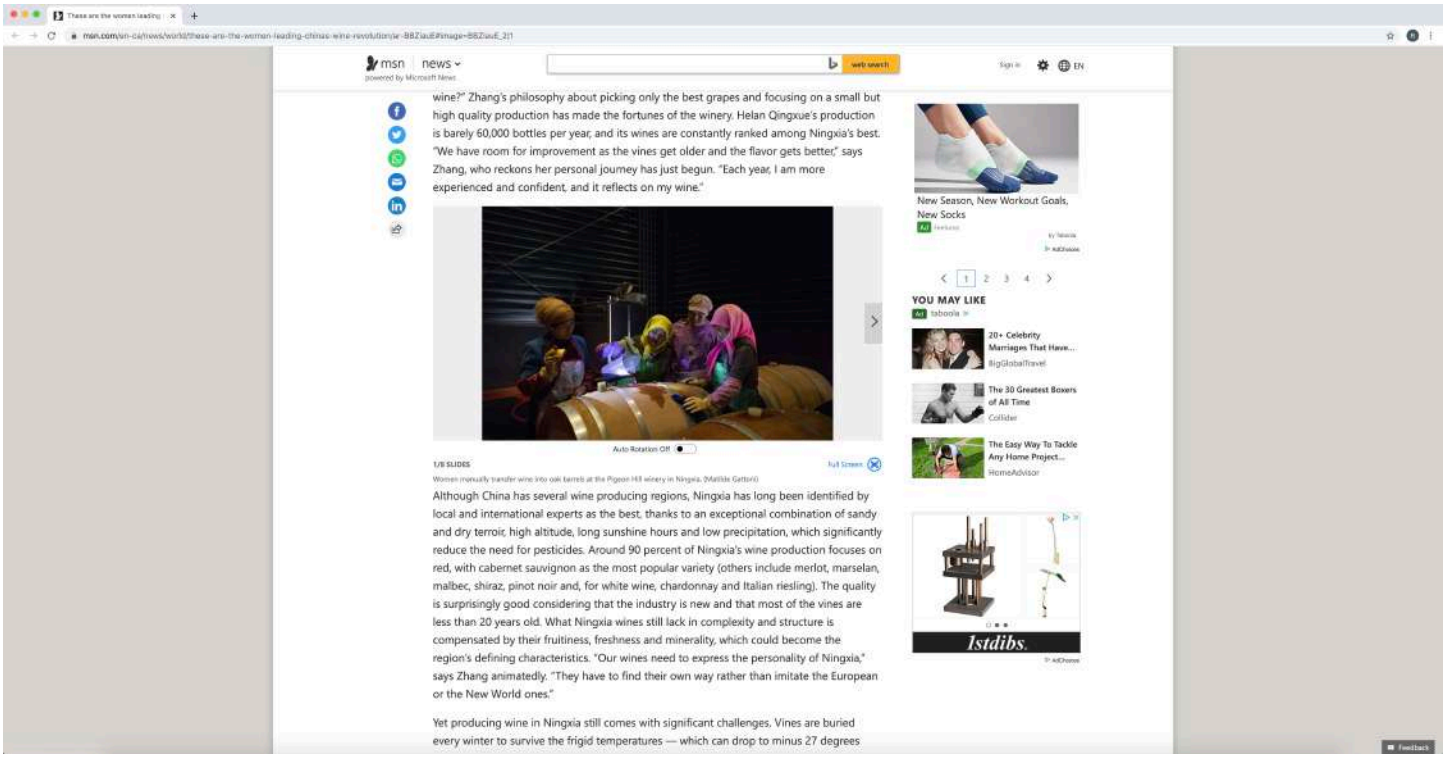

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Although China has several wine producing regions, Ningxia has long been identified by local and international experts as the best, thanks to an exceptional combination of sandy and dry terroir, high altitude, long sunshine hours and low precipitation, which significantly reduce the need for pesticides. Around 90 percent of Ningxia's wine production focuses on red, with cabernet sauvignon as the most popular variety (others include merlot, marselan, malbec, shiraz, pinot noir and, for white wine, chardonnay and Italian riesling). The quality is surprisingly good considering that the industry is new and that most of the vines are less than 20 years old. What Ningxia wines still lack in complexity and structure is compensated by their fruitiness, freshness and minerality, which could become the region's defining characteristics. "Our wines need to express the personality of Ningxia," says Zhang animatedly. "They have to find their own way rather than imitate the European or the New World ones."

Yet producing wine in Ningxia still comes with significant challenges. Vines are buried every winter to survive the frigid temperatures — which can drop to minus 27 degrees

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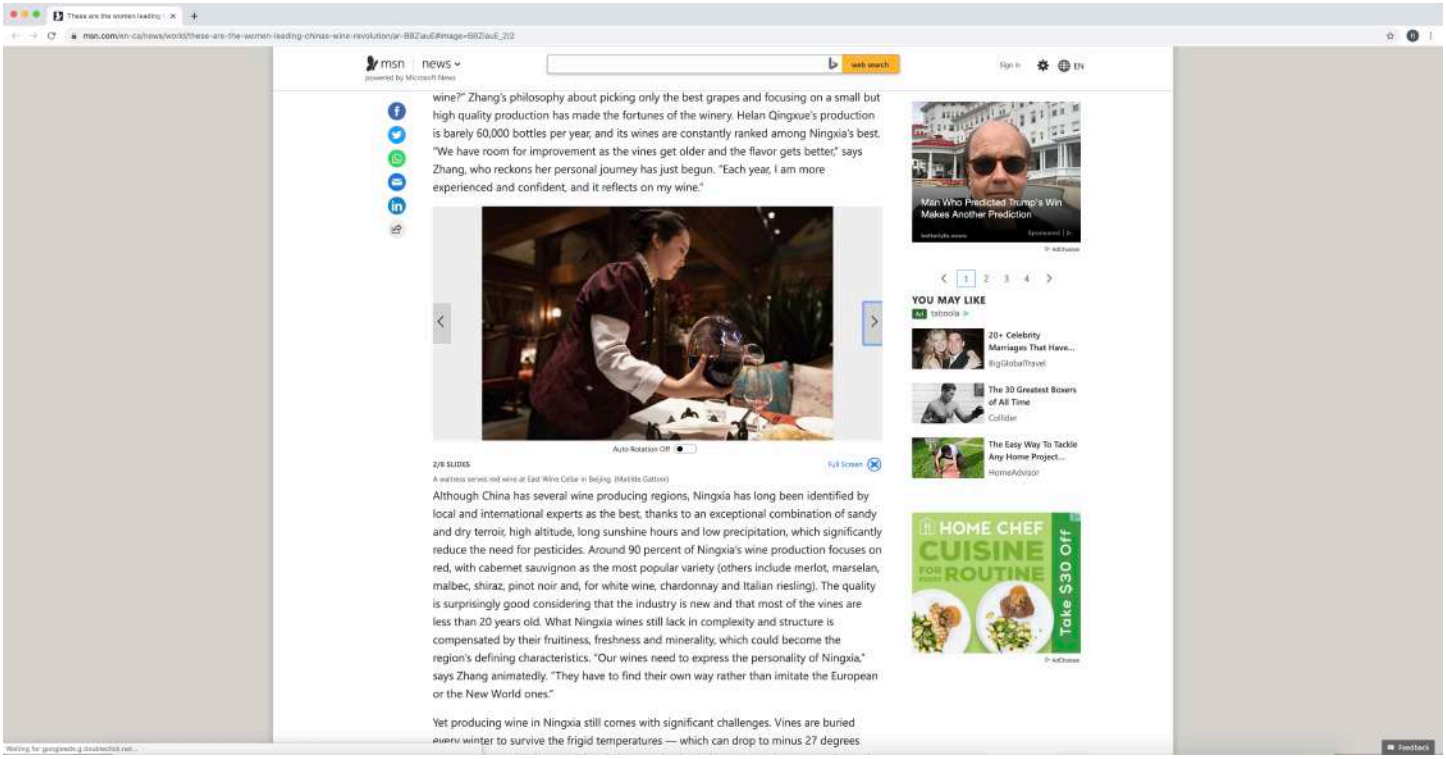
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A waitress serves red wine at East Wine Cellar in Beijing. (Matilde Gattoni)
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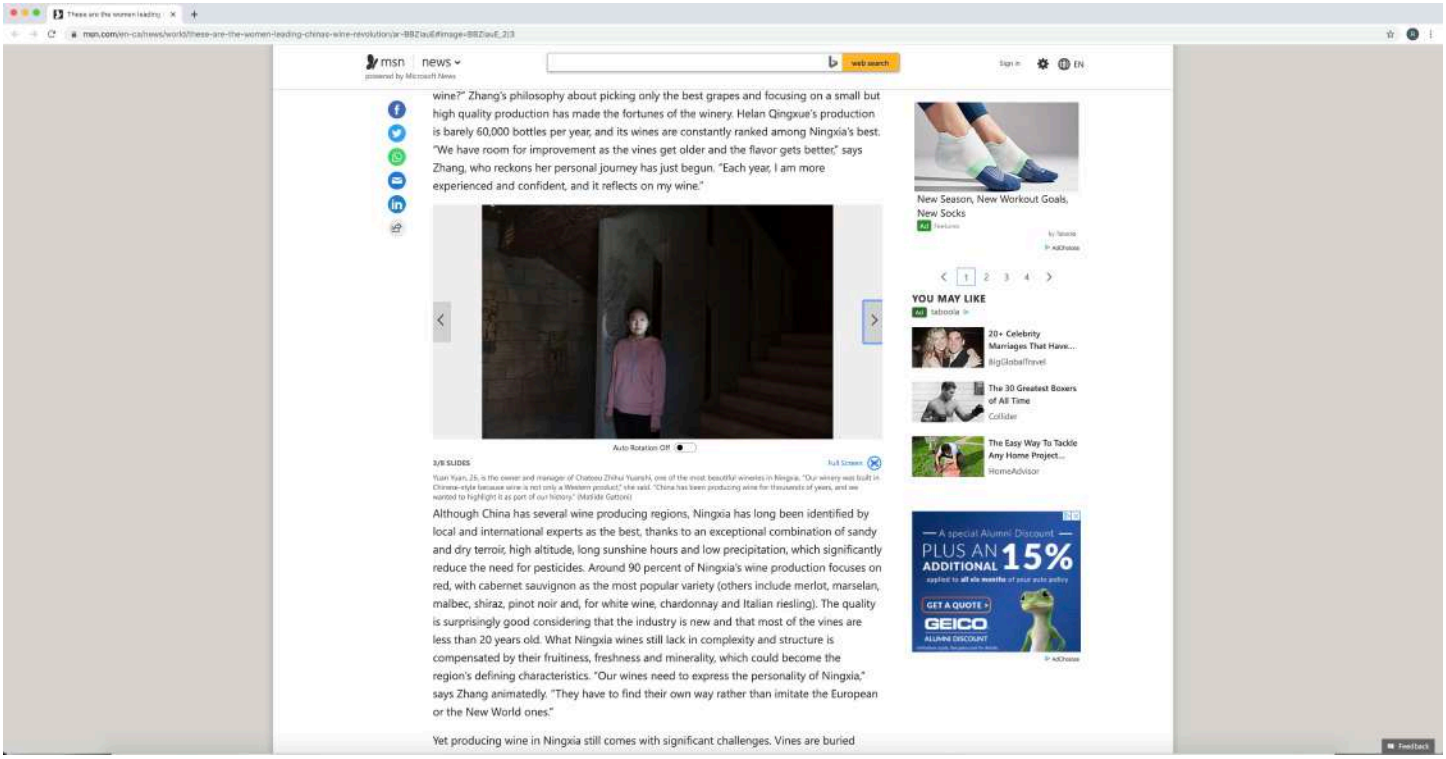

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2/8 SLIDES

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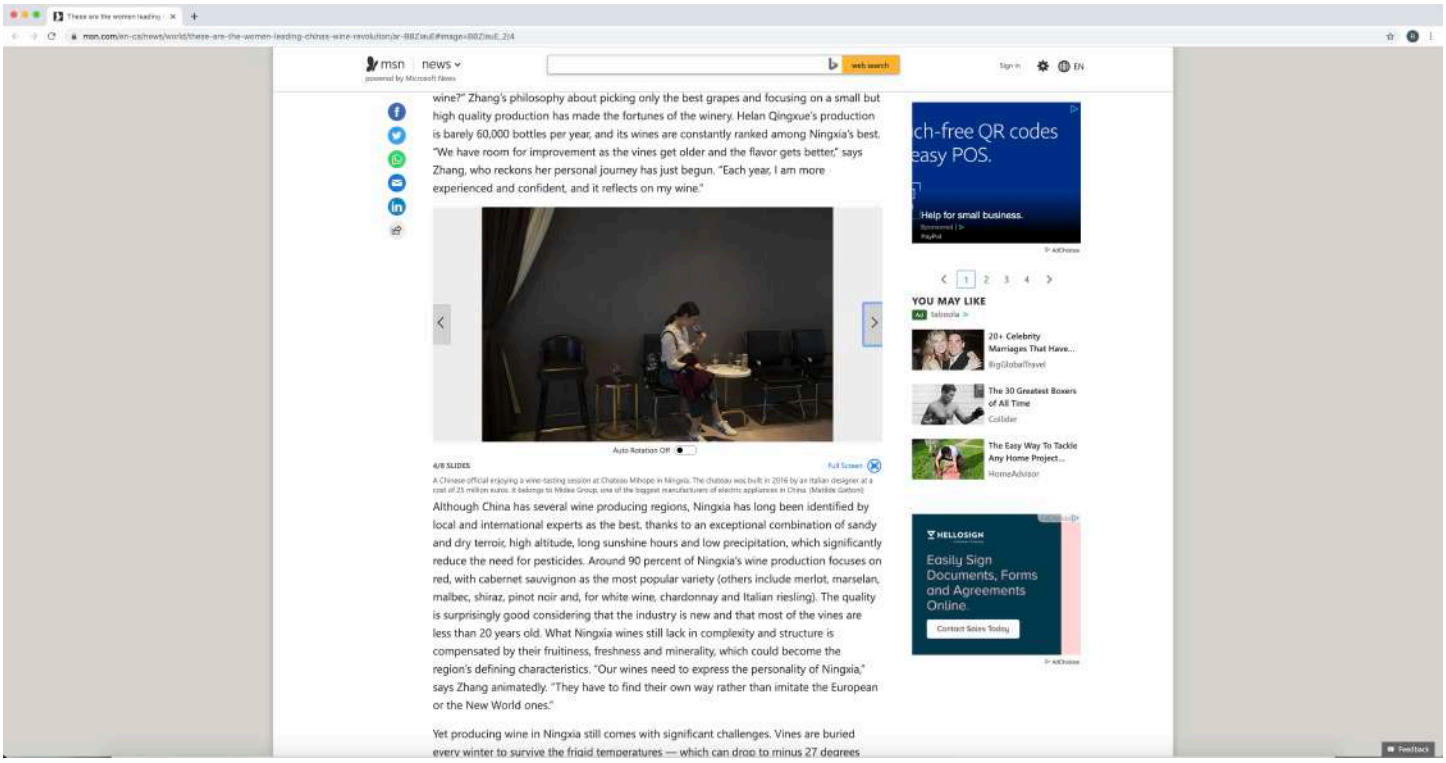

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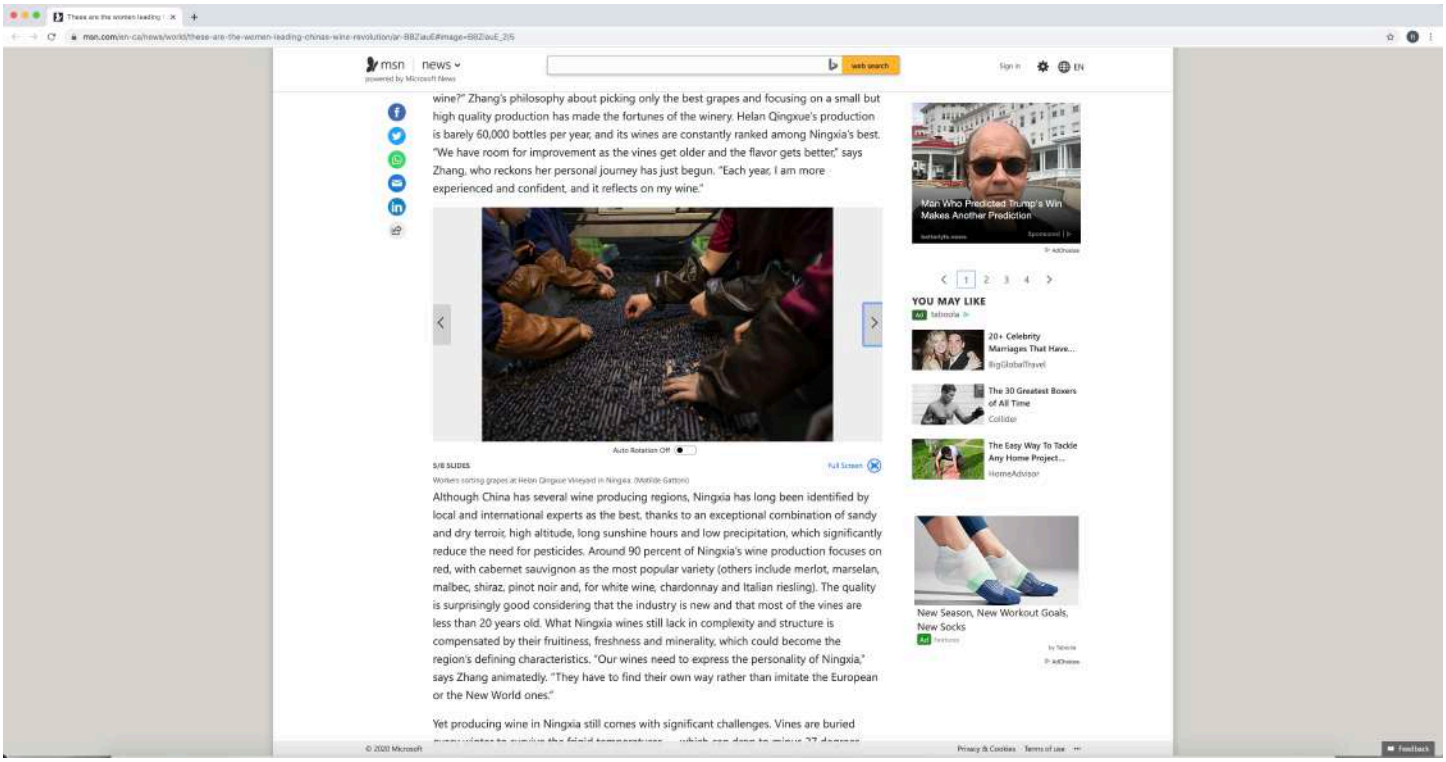
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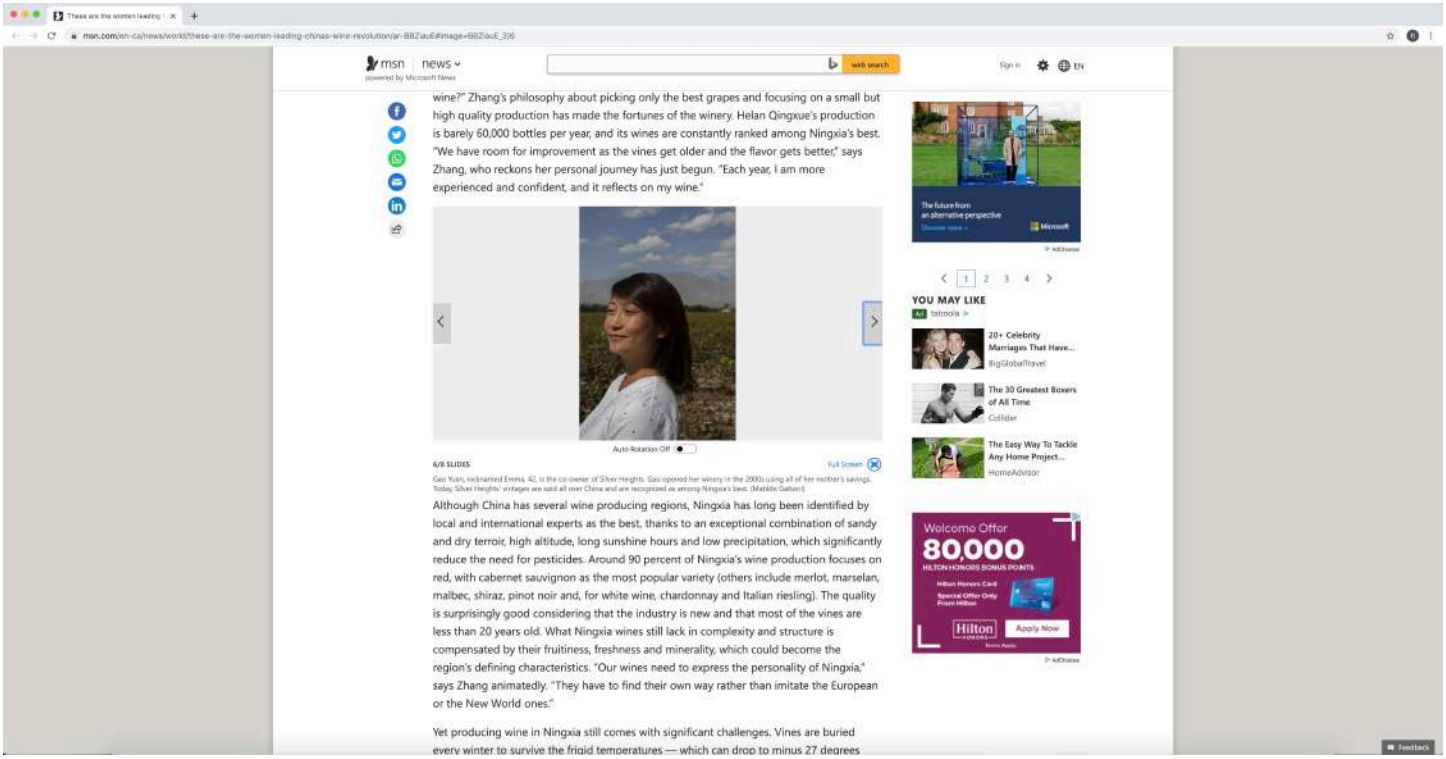
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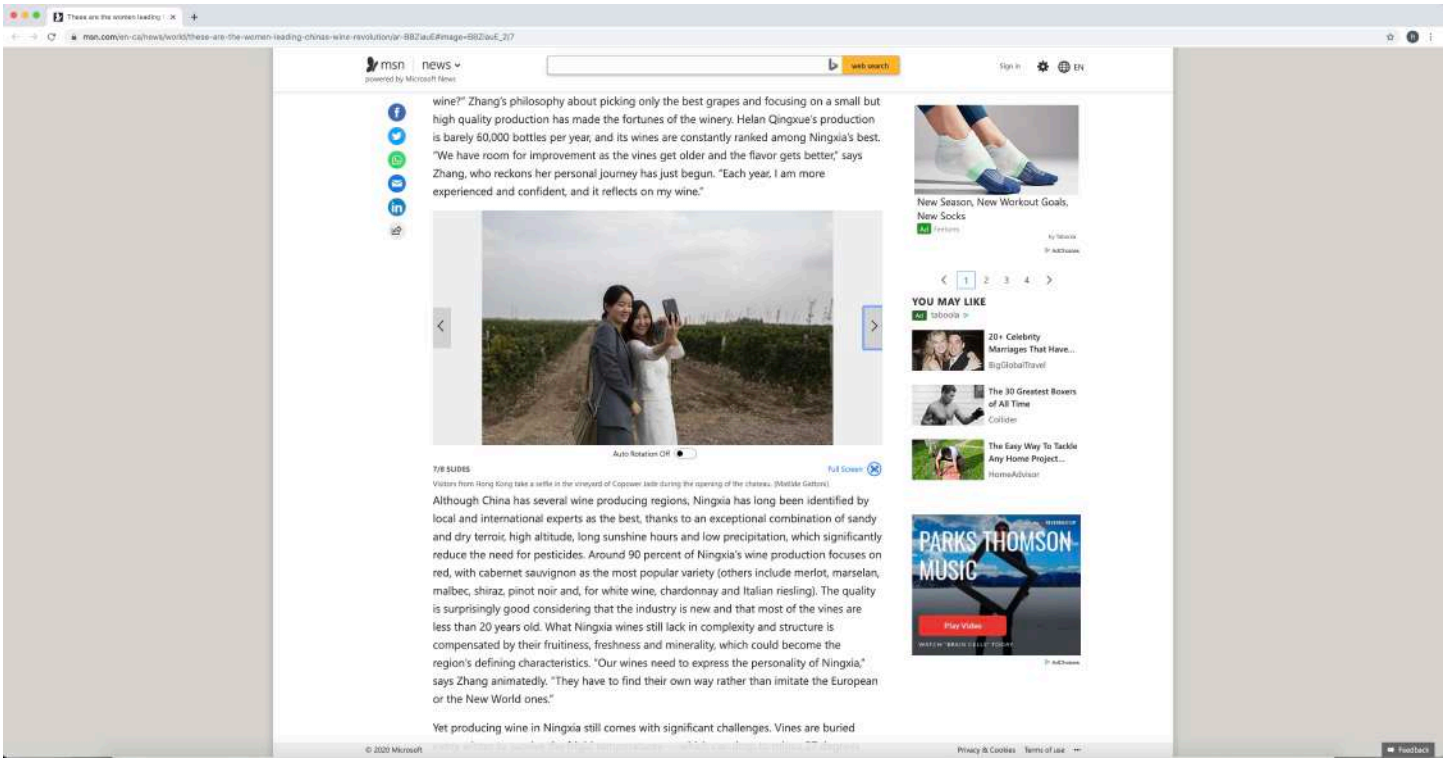

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Visitors from Hong Kong take a selfie in the vineyard of Copower Jade during the opening of the chateau. (Melilde Gattoni)

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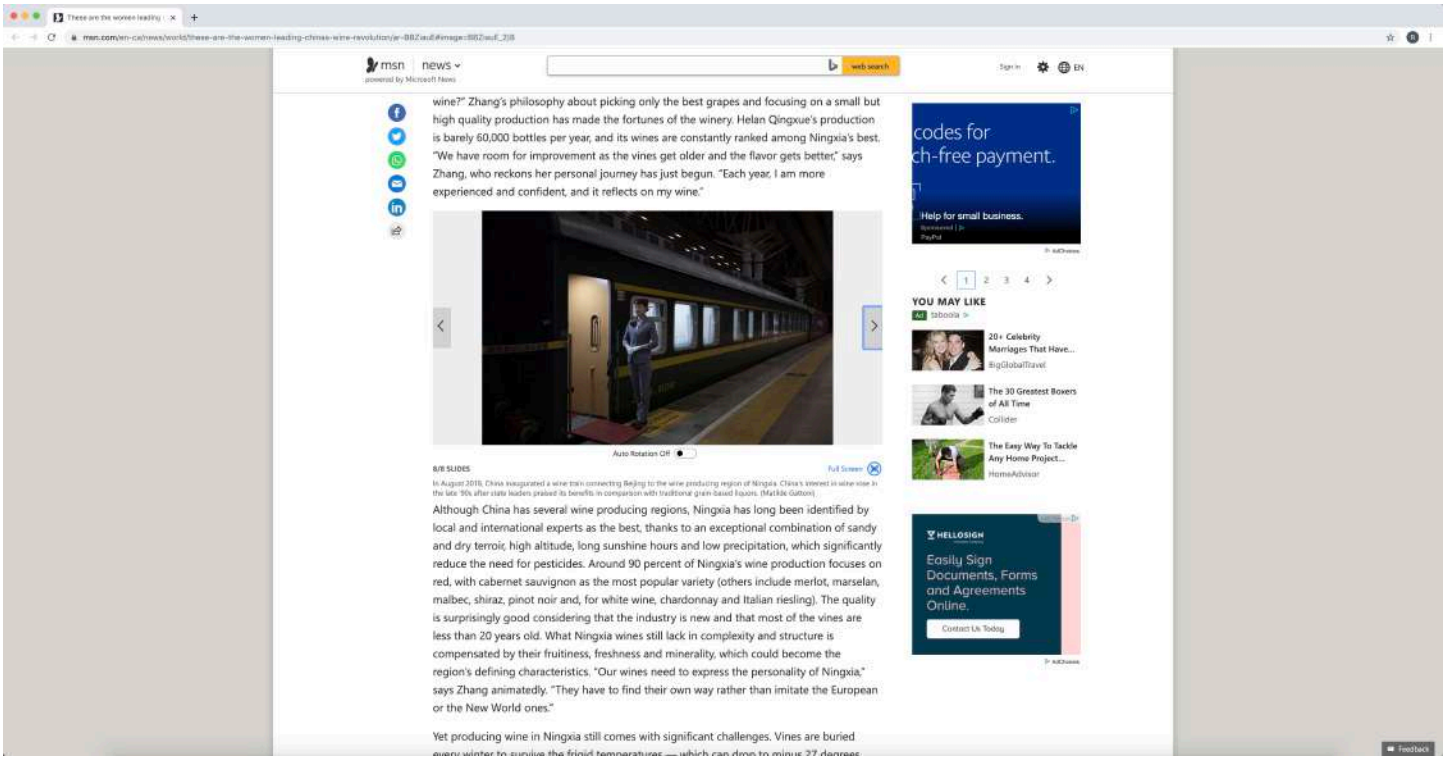
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